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NOTES

THE SOCIALIST PARTY AND AMERICAN CONVENTION METHODS

The significance of the Socialist party is usually considered in terms of the social theory which it advocates and the class which it claims to represent. There is a third aspect of this new party, however, which deserves thoughtful consideration. It is a fact little known that the Socialists are introducing among us a new type of political organization and new political methods very much in contrast with those to which through long usage we have become habituated. This contrast is nowhere more marked than in the matter of national conventions and the nomination of presidential candidates. With the old party conventions fresh in mind a brief comparative review of the corresponding Socialist machinery and tactics may serve a useful purpose.

The chief characteristic of the Socialist party organically is the direct control of the party membership and the consequent direct and individual responsibility of party representatives. This is exemplified in the election of the delegates to the national convention. Unlike the old parties, the Socialists hold no subordinate conventions for this purpose—either state, congressional, district, or county. On the contrary, the representatives of each state are seated in the convention by the direct vote of the party membership in that state. Each voting member of the national convention therefore is an individual delegate at large from the state of his residence. By this method of election the local boss and the local machine are entirely eliminated. There is no preliminary wire-pulling, no herding of local office-holders, no packing of local delegate bodies, no exchange of political promises and favors, no force, and no fraud. As a consequence, contests are few¹ and the delegate to the national convention goes to that body ordinarily uninstructed, free from the tyranny of the unit rule, and beholden to no boss or machine.

¹ At the last Socialist convention no contesting delegates put in an appearance.

Independence of the rule of the boss and the machine which thus characterize the position of the individual Socialist delegate applies equally to the convention as a whole. This to a great extent is the result of the fact that the Socialist convention, in marked contrast to those of the old parties, is altogether free from the dominating and manipulating influence of a national committee unresponsive to the immediate will of the party membership. This freedom is secured, first, by the mode of election and control of the Socialist national committee, and second, by the character and limitation of the duties with which it is charged. To make clear the import of this matter a comparative statement will serve best.

The old party national committees are elected at the time of the convention for a term of four years. One member is designated by each state and territorial delegation. The committee thus constituted issues the call to the succeeding convention, examines the credentials of the delegates to it, makes out the temporary roll, agrees upon a temporary chairman to be recommended to the convention, and through its chairman calls that body to order. From this brief statement it is evident that the old party national committee represents the faction dominant at the time of its appointment, four years preceding the performance of its most vital functions; that its members are beyond party recall or control since the bodies which elected them had only temporary existence; that its natural purpose is to continue in power the faction in control at the time of its appointment, and that through its ability to determine the personnel of the temporary organization and practically to name the temporary chairman it is able to go very far toward the domination of the convention. All those facts indeed are amply proved by the events of the last Republican convention.

The Socialist national committee, in striking contrast, is elected, not by the convention delegations but directly by the party membership. Its incumbents serve for short terms and are subject to recall at any time by referendum vote of the party in the states which they represent. Its duties in connection with the national convention are definitely set forth in the party constitution and therefore can neither be abated nor enlarged by the committee. They are five in number: to issue the call; to prepare and publish

through its executive secretary a roster of accredited delegates; to formulate the rules and order of business subject to amendment and adoption by the delegates; through its chairman to call the convention to order, and to make reports and recommendations to that body after it is organized. It has no power to pass upon the credentials of delegates nor to interfere with the organization, temporary or permanent, of the convention itself.

It is thus seen that the Socialist national committee is a body directly representative and at all times under the control of the party membership. If it stands for a faction it must be the dominant faction of the moment. It has no power over the convention but has merely co-operation and advisory relations with it. In short, while the old party committee is to all intents and purposes an instrument so devised that it may easily stand above the party will, abrogate to itself power, and hold the convention in the grip of the mort-main, the Socialist committee has none of these sinister possibilities but is to the convention merely a helpful device in the transaction of its business and to the party membership a responsive servant.

The democratic instinct of the Socialist party and the determination to avoid factional and boss rule are again exemplified by the convention in the apportionment of delegates and the character of its organization. Contrary to the practice of the old parties the Socialist delegates are apportioned by states, not in proportion to population or congressional representation but to party membership. Moreover, mainly on account of the limitations upon the power of the national committee which we have noted, the convention meets with the state absolutely clean. There is no steering committee behind the scenes, no scheme for the determination of contests in the interest of any candidate, no temporary chairman preappointed to execute the will of a faction.

The mode of organization is plainly defined by the party constitution, thus barring all finesse. In obedience to its provisions the delegates are brought to order by the chairman of the national committee, the roll is called to ascertain the number of *uncontested* delegates, and these delegates proceed to perfect the organization. The process is simple. Nominations for temporary chairman and

secretary are made from the floor and election is usually by show of hands. The *uncontested* delegates thus organized proceed at once to the nomination and election of the members of the regular committees, including the committee on contested seats, and to the discussion of the convention rules prepared by the national committee. Finally action on the report of the committee on contested seats brings the convention to the point of permanent organization.

At this point the most peculiar and significant organic feature of the convention makes its appearance. Quite in accord with the usual custom in such cases the temporary chairman is continued as the executive of the permanent organization, but he is continued *for the day only*, and throughout the life of the convention a new chairman is elected at the beginning of each day's session.

As the result of its control of contents and rules, its self-appointed committees, its daily elected chairman, and the direct election of its own members the Socialist convention is thoroughly democratic in character and in the conduct of its affairs. The individual delegate is no pawn in a game conducted by self-constituted leaders of factions but is a peer among peers and consciously carries himself as such. One might almost say that there is no scheming and no leadership in the convention. Certainly there are none of the ordinary evidences of these things in the establishment of headquarters, the holding of caucuses, the delivery of emotional appeals, and attempts to stampede the delegates by demonstrations and counter-demonstrations—things so characteristic of the old party tactics. Nor is there ever any evidence of the existence of a steamroller. In short, the Socialist convention is conducted by the delegates. Consequently everything is dragged into the open, discussion is general and spontaneous, dictation by no man is tolerated, and any attempt at gavel rule is met and defeated by quick appeal.

This democratic management has of course its disadvantages. It is productive of many short and undigested speeches and much waste of time in parliamentary haggling. It would perhaps be impossible in a convention much larger than the Socialist body with its three hundred members. On the other hand, under it the majority *does* rule, matters *are* discussed on their merits, mob

emotionalism *is* kept in abeyance, and on the whole the parliamentary bickering seems to cause no more obstruction and delay than the maneuvering of the old party factions in their efforts at control.¹

It is not, however, so much in its democratic organization and conduct as in its peculiar composition and functions that the Socialist convention constitutes a remarkable innovation in American politics. The voting delegates are in this case not the sole members of the convention. In addition there sit in this body with voice but no vote various and sundry other representatives of the party. These for the most part consist of the translator-secretaries of several affiliated foreign-speaking organizations, members of certain special committees appointed at previous conventions, and the highest executive offices of the party—the executive secretary and the executive committee. With the national committee in an advisory and reporting capacity meeting at the same time and place, the convention thus constituted has more the appearance of a congress or deliberative assembly than of a typical party nominating body. This appearance is borne out by the functions which it performs.

In this connection three points stand out in relief:

First, the Socialist convention is not primarily a nominating body with a secondary function in the preparation of an appeal to the voters. The nomination of presidential and vice-presidential candidates is indeed a matter of such minor importance that in the last convention nominating speeches were not allowed and the whole matter was disposed of during a portion of one afternoon session.²

Second, the Socialist convention is in fact a deliberative and

¹ It is interesting, in passing, to note the results which would have followed the use of Socialist methods by the Republican party in connection with the presidential nomination this year. First, state representation in the convention in proportion to party membership would have greatly reduced Taft's strength by cutting down the relative number of southern delegates. Second, Roosevelt delegates would probably have been seated without contest in those states where the party vote was in his favor. Third, it is likely that the majority of contests would have been decided in Roosevelt's favor because he would then doubtless have had a majority of the uncontested delegates. Fourth, this being the case, the convention would in any event have been organized by the Roosevelt forces—they would have elected the temporary chairman and the convention committees. In short, Roosevelt's nomination would have been practically certain.

² The convention was in session for some days.

constructive congress. In addition to the ordinary convention functions it receives and discusses reports and recommendations from the national committee and national party officers and organizations; it appoints special committees for social, economic, and political research and deliberates upon the reports of such committees; it formulates for the consideration of the membership the attitude of the party on all important matters of principle and tactics, and finally it considers and proposes modifications of the party organization and methods.

Some idea of the scope and specific character of this work may be had from a review of the chief matters under consideration at the last convention. These included reports from the national secretary of the party, the Woman's Department, the Lyceum Department, the Socialist representative in Congress, and from eight foreign-speaking organizations affiliated with the party; research committees appointed at the party congress held in 1910 presented for consideration the results of the investigations on the subjects of industrial education, immigration, the commission form of government for cities, and on the agricultural situation; the convention itself appointed and acted upon the reports of Committees on Labor Organizations and Their Relation to the Socialist Party, on Co-operation, on a State and Municipal Program, on Foreign-speaking Socialist Organizations, on International Relations, on the Party Press, on Ways and Means, on Resolutions, on the Party Platform, and on the Party Constitution and Organization.

Third, the Socialist convention in the performance of its functions is in the most literal sense a representative body only. The platform and program which it adopts, amendments which it makes to the party constitution, and all resolutions which it passes must be submitted to a referendum vote of the membership before they become the official action of the party, and any other decisions which it reaches may by constitutional provision be subject to such referendum review. In short, the Socialist convention is after all but a committee of the party whose work must stand the test of the sober second thought of the membership as a whole.

The most significant feature of all this and one which is absolutely unique in American politics is the research method of the

convention and its committees. These committees, which are not infrequently continued from convention to convention, are not supposed to confine their work to an exegesis of Marx but to secure the facts and interpret them scientifically. The actual results are of course often disappointing, though the matter is taken more and more seriously and sometimes there is presented by a committee a most enlightening analysis based upon a thorough exploitation of standard secondary material, government statistics and reports, and much original research. The important thing, however, is the method. It is refreshing, indeed, to see the representatives of an American political party assembled in convention gravely discussing a social or political problem on its merits in order that the party may occupy a portion that is at once tactically sound and scientifically tenable. It is commonly assumed that the Socialist party is absolutely fixed and dogmatic in its attitude. Nothing is farther from the truth. Marx is indeed the heroic figure, the absolute authority of the soap boxer, but in the Socialist convention the party program is being slowly and painfully wrought out on the basis of an honest attempt to face the facts.

There are many other peculiar characteristics of the Socialist convention which might be considered. Enough, however, has perhaps been brought out to justify the thesis that the Socialists in this country are creating a political organization and political methods that are worth consideration on their merits as possible contributions to a more wholesome, more democratic, and more progressive expression of the social will.

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WASHINGTON NOTES

THE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE ON COTTON
REPEALING CANADIAN RECIPROCITY
JURISDICTION OF THE COMMERCE COURT
FACTS ABOUT THE COFFEE TRUST
THE RAILROADS AND THE CANAL

Another analysis of the Tariff Board's work has been prepared by the Committee on Ways and Means (H.R. Report No. 829; 62d Cong., 2d sess.). In this document, which is presented as a report to accompany